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Last Man Standing

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LAST MAN STANDING

Iowa State University is a big business. That is a fact rarely recognized but utterly true. It is a big business with significantly different goals than, say Microsoft or AOL/Time Warner, but it is a big business nonetheless.

The president of ISU is its CEO. That's not a loose analogy. The president reports to the Board of Regents (Board of Directors). The president has other executive officers below him (vice presidents, provost, deans, etc.). He is ultimately responsible for his company's product (education). Somehow, other things become important to shareholders (Iowans) like stock dividends (athletics).

ISU CEO Gregory Geoffroy has been on the job for just five months, so this is only a first impression, but at nearly every turn, the guy has been either a breath of fresh air or a shrewd masseuse of campus opinion. He has already repaired much of the PR damage his predecessor did in terms of both the student body and the faculty.

And it was extraordinarily easy. All it took was acting less like a CEO and more like a university president.

In business, the only bottom line is the bottom line. You get to the upper echelon of the business world by not forgetting that. Be as creative as you want, be a world-class organizer of people, have an amazing knack for connecting with strangers. Whatever. None of that means anything unless you can use those skills to make money, money, money. The rungs of the corporate ladders get awful slippery for those who try to balance other factors, like loyalty and safety, and ask other questions, like, "Isn't this illegal?"

Non-monetary factors are relevant only if they start becoming monetary. That's why we have companies deciding whether to recall an unsafe product by asking the number crunchers if the imminent lawsuits would be cheaper. Unfortunately (Firestone), number crunchers are not psychic and do make mistakes.

Former ISU President Martin Jischke took this CEO stuff seriously. Jischke's days were spent securing private gifts and government grants, fighting for more money at the Statehouse, working on the university's strategic plans, poring over budget figures, etc. He was very hands on, at least when it came to moola.

When it came to issues that students and faculty found important (free-speech zones, The Sept. 29 Movement, the faculty petition for a presidential job review, etc.), Marty was far less active. Those who bothered to raise the dreaded non-monetary factors were ignored if they were students and swept under the academic rug if they were faculty.

The vast majority of students who Jischke saw were either GSB-types or Honors Program-types. I've known folks from both

campus. They're cut from the same basic bolt of dork cloth. Dr. J rarely mingled with the average student, the guy down the hall you've never talked to, the sorority girl in size negative three pants, the teeming masses in the Union.

Jischke made no apologies for that. He simply did not think that part of his job as a university president was to seek or even consider input from students or faculty. His job was to get the university more money and decide in a broad sense what to do with that cash. When the good doctor was called upon to settle issues, his decisions were often authoritarian and blunt.

Of course, Jischke didn't care what people thought. He acted with a complete belief that he was right and that was all that needed to be said. If it was controversial, oh well. He was above it.

On the other hand, Geoffroy has gone out of his way to tackle some of the very issues that were sticky for his predecessor.

Free-speech zones? They're on their way out, even though the PR lackeys and other assorted administrators wanted him to keep them. Geoffroy said even before he was hired that the whole concept of a free-speech zone didn't sit well with him.

The ISU Foundation? Geoffroy has given signals that he wants the group to be more open and has said numerous times that the organization that has collected hundreds of millions of dollars in the name of the university should tell the public how it spends that money.

Geoffroy has said his word to be a visible presence on campus and off. He's been spotted at faculty parties (even journalism faculty, a tough crowd), Hy-Vee, the Union, central campus and many other places.

He's also taking stands based on, gasp, a conscience. He's put the possibility of arming DPS officers back on the table. He says that it makes sense, even though our Faculty Senate voted against allowing campus cops to carry stun

guns. I can't imagine Jischke being as stubborn for similar reasons.

When Geoffroy announced Iowa State's next fund-raising campaign, he also announced that money would be spent on endowed professors and student scholarships. That's two things: 1) It's a practical idea, as budget constraints will drive tuition up and faculty out the door. 2) It's also a great PR move. Those who complained the university was too concerned about money and the research and facilities it can buy now have one less thing to complain about. Nobody bitches about extra scholarships.

Geoffroy told me in an interview last April that as he saw it, Jischke's unpopularity had more to do with style than substance. I wasn't sure if that was true at the time, but consider me convinced. Double G has clearly shown he has more of a flair for the public-perception portion of his job and that he does indeed consider it important.

But what about all that stuff that Jischke did do well? Like I said earlier, this is only a first impression of Geoffroy. Jischke did have that money thing down. When he was around, we were rolling in it.

Not so much rolling anymore. Donations are down. The budget is super freaky tight. Tuition is set to go up almost 20 percent next year.

We need more money, Jischke-level money, the big whoppers. If all it took to be president was being a swell guy, we could have hired Phil Donahue. Don't forget, after all, Iowa State University is a business. Gregory Geoffroy is its CEO. I applaud him for seeing his job as more than that, but he can't forget what he was hired to do.

Geoffroy has proven how he's not Jischke. Let's hope he doesn't forget to show how he is.

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